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Reagan Restricts Press Contacts To Curb Leaks

Disclosures of Classified Data Called Major Problem for Defense, Foreign Policy

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WASHINGTON — In an effort to curb news leaks of classified foreign policy and defense matters, the White House has sharply restricted the freedom of government officials to talk to the press about these matters.

President Reagan issued a statement declaring that "unauthorized disclosure" of classified National Security Council and intelligence information "is a problem of major proportions within the U.S. government." The statement decries the government's inability to identify and punish the sources of such leaks and says this failure "must be remedied."

To cut off the leaks, the new policy requires advance approval of all contacts between government officials and the press in which classified national security matters might be disclosed. Written reports would be required on the contents of all such interviews. Distribution of classified policy documents and related information would be restricted further and officials with access to documents and data would be subject to "all legal methods" of investigation if leaks occurred.

Advisers' Duties Outlined

In a separate White House statement, President Reagan outlined the duties of his foreign policy advisers. The move is an apparent attempt to begin resolving the squabbling and confusion among Mr. Reagan's foreign policy staff that marked the administration's first year. The statement spells out stronger powers for William Clark, the President's new assistant for national security affairs, and it creates lower-level inter-agency groups to coordinate policy making.

The new procedures on press contacts were drafted by the national security staff last week and circulated for comment to the State Department, the Pentagon and other affected agencies.

The original draft, which contained even harsher measures, would have required advance approval of press contacts on all national security subjects, regardless of whether they were classified, and bluntly specified that officials suspected of leaking would be subject to lie detector tests.

The practical effect of the final, toned-down version may be just as broad, however, because many foreign policy and defense subjects are routinely classified.

Mr. Reagan, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, and Secretary of State Alexander Haig have all complained strongly in recent months about what they regard as improper disclosures of national security policy discussions and decisions. The President recently told U.S. News & World Report: "It seems you can't even think about a subject without suddenly reading about it or hearing about it on the media."

President's Concern

Administration officials say the President has been particularly upset recently over stories disclosing details of the forthcoming fiscal 1983 defense budget, and the recent discussions and decisions on selling arms to Taiwan. He recently warned the Cabinet and his staff against talking to the press about pending budget decisions.

According to administration officials, this irritation was one reason for a decision last week to require advance White House approval of television appearances by Cabinet officers and other top officials.

The restrictions on press contacts also may reflect the effort to give control over foreign and defense policy to Mr. Clark, who was installed a few days before the new procedures were issued for comment. Leaks to the press are traditional weapons in the bureaucratic battling over foreign policy, battling that Mr. Clark has been hired to reduce.

Constitutional Rights Balanced

In his statement, the President declared that he must balance the constitutional rights of free speech and a free press against the need for government efficiency. "I do not believe," he said, "that the Constitution entitles government employees, entrusted with confidential information critical to the functioning and effectiveness of the government, to disclose such information with impunity."

Mr. Clark contended in a separate statement that the government faces a "pattern" of leaks that "directly hampers the development and implementation of an effective foreign policy for the United States," by ruling out policy options requiring secrecy, or jeopardizing policies already under way.

Mr. Clark declared that "the measure to

be taken under this directive shouldn't be construed as criticism of the press. The press has been doing its job—collecting information—better than the government has been doing its job—protecting national security information." He affirmed that "the American people have a right to know, through the free press, what their government is doing."

Perennial Challenge

Mr. Reagan's administration, like other new administrations, has been frustrated by the difficulty of keeping policies secret from the large, competitive Washington press corps. The administration has asked reporters, with varying success, to withhold stories they were prepared to print on military budgets and on Libya's alleged effort to assassinate top U.S. officials.

In addition, the Pentagon and State Department have opened unsuccessful investigations of leaks relating to new bombers, African policy and other matters.

Many journalists and some government officials specializing in foreign and defense policy contend that the government is overly sensitive to disclosures and misuses its power to classify documents as secret. They argue that too many documents are kept secret because they are politically embarrassing, rather than because they are critical to national security.

The White House statement on the structure of its foreign policy apparatus places Mr. Clark in charge of "developing, coordinating and implementing national security policy" as approved by the President.

These powers appear to give Mr. Clark greater control of decision-making than his predecessor, Richard Allen, whose principal function was as a coordinator of decisions made by the NSC.

The statement goes on to say, though, that the Secretary of State is the President's "principal" foreign policy adviser, and it similarly gives the Secretary of Defense and the Director of Central Intelligence the role of principal adviser in their areas.

The White House also said it canceled 32 Presidential directives left from the Carter administration, but it didn't disclose the directives. Mr. Clark said in a statement that "several" already had been superseded by Reagan administration directives, and that others weren't relevant any longer. He didn't elaborate.